

## **YOUR COPTIC ORTHODOX CHURCH DURING PASSION WEEK**

### **The Holy Pascha**

#### **Introduction**

Passion Week is an extra special week in the Coptic Orthodox Church, where the church replaces the prayers, the hymns and the hourly Psalms (Agbia) with the reading of the hours of Passion Week. We also pray the Hymn of the Pascha (i.e. prayer of Thok Tee-Gom; chanted 12 times, which is followed by the Lord's Prayer each time). These changes are applied as the hourly prayer of the Psalms of the Agbia include prophecies about the Life of the Lord Jesus Christ from the time of His incarnation to the time of His ascension while during Passion week the church is only focused on and occupied with the sufferings of the Lord.

#### **Outside Jerusalem**

The church prays in the first "Khorus" (section) outside the Altar, this occurs because the Lord Jesus was persecuted and was crucified outside Jerusalem.

Saint Paul in his letter to the Hebrews said in **Heb 13:12, 13** "12Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, *suffered outside the gate*. 13Therefore *let us go forth to Him, outside the camp*, bearing His reproach."

#### **The Pascha**

Passion Week is a week of sufferings, and is called Pascha Week. The word "Pascha" means "Pass Over". During this week the church remembers the events of the Exodus of the people of Israel from the Land of Egypt; after they lived the life of slavery to Pharaoh (who is a symbol of the Devil). Now The Lord ordered Moses in **Ex 12:7-13** for "*the people of Israel to take some of the blood of the lamb of the Passover and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses where they eat it. 8Then they shall eat the flesh on that night; roasted in fire, with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs they shall eat it... .It is the Lord's Passover. 12For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast;. . . 13Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.*"

This was a symbol of the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus on the cross, as He shed His Holy Blood on the cross to free the believers in Him from the bondage of the devil's slavery, and the death of sin.

#### **The Morning and Evening Sessions**

Each day of the Holy Pascha is divided into two sessions, a morning and an evening session. The morning session contains five prayers namely the First Hour (i.e. the Morning Prayer), Third Hour, Sixth Hour, Ninth Hour, and the Eleventh Hour. The

evening session also contains five nightly hours. The Twelfth Hour Prayer is added on Good Friday. The day is calculated from sunset to sunset of the next day.

### **Matanyas during the Pascha**

Matanyas (i.e. prostrations) are also performed during the daytime session of prayers while the people are fasting. However the night session prayers are offered without prostrations since the people are no longer fasting.

### **The General Funeral**

All the prayers of Passion Week are dedicated to the remembrance of the sufferings, the crucifixion, and the death of our Lord Jesus Christ, therefore no raising of incense or funeral services are conducted during this week, with the exception of Covenant Thursday. To compensate for this, the church conducts a General Funeral for all the believers, this service is conducted following the conclusion of the Palm Sunday Service. The General Funeral prayer includes praying on the water which is then sprinkled on all the believers lest one of them passes away during Passion Week. If however one of the believers does depart during Passion Week, the body is brought to the church to attend one of the hours of the Pascha prayers.

### **Chanting Power and Glory to the Lord on the Cross**

The whole church chants “Thok Te-Tee-Gom” i.e. To You is the Power and the Glory . . . ., 12 times in every hour of the five morning and the five evening hours. This chant is taken from the Book of Revelations, (Rev. 4:9-5:12, 13-7:12) and is chanted prior to the Psalm of the hour which points to the sufferings of the Lord Christ. The church performs this chant instead of praying the usual 12 Psalms of each hour. Thus, the whole church sings to her redeemer and her saviour who went through the pain and suffering according to His will saying “to You is the power, the glory, the blessings, and the majesty for ever and ever Amen”.

The phrase “pa-so-teer en-aghathos” which means “My Good Saviour”, is added as of the eleventh hour of Pascha Tuesday morning prayer, this is the hour the priests, the scribes, and the elders of the Jews started to negotiate and plan how to capture the Lord Jesus Christ to kill Him. Thus, the event leading up to the salvation of mankind has begun. That is why we say “My Good Saviour”.

Furthermore, the phrase “ta-gom nem pa-esmo pe epshois af-sho-pe ne ev-so-tereya ef-owab”, which means “My strength and my praise is the Lord who became my Holy Salvation”, is added as of the prayers of Friday eve of the Holy Pascha, which is Covenant Thursday night.

### **The Kiss of Betrayal**

As a result of the kiss of betrayal of Judas, kissing is therefore not allowed as of Wednesday eve until the end of Saturday. This is to reject the kiss of Judas Iscariot; the traitor, who led the Jews to the Lord Jesus identifying Him with a kiss, and reminding us that we too should not have any deceiving feelings towards God or each other.

### **Covenant Thursday Services**

While there are no raising of incense during the first three days of the week (i.e. Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday), the church conducts the service of the Lakan (the Mass of the Water) as well as a Holy Mass on Covenant Thursday.

During the Lakan of Covenant Thursday, the priest girds himself with a towel like the Lord Jesus Christ who is the great example of humility, and washes the feet of the congregation as the Lord washed the feet of His disciples', saying to them (**Jn 13:14**) "If I then, *your* Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."

There are no Holy Masses held during Passion Week, except on Covenant Thursday, where our Lord Jesus Christ established the sacrament of "Efkharistia" (i.e. the Sacrament of Holy Communion). Therefore, the church reminds us that Palm Sunday coincides with the tenth day of the Jewish month, where the sacrificial lamb is chosen and is kept for four days under inspection, until it is slaughtered on Thursday. The Lord Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who offered Himself on Thursday as a sacrifice for the New Covenant, before He is offered as a sacrifice on the Cross.

During Covenant Thursday Mass, when the people pray the creed, they do not say "He suffered and was buried; arose from the dead..."; as the church is only celebrating the last supper of the Lord, and is yet to commemorate his suffering on the cross and His glorious resurrection

In addition the church does not pray the "Prayer of Reconciliation" during the Covenant Thursday mass, as this Reconciliation was only accomplished at the death of the Lord on the cross on Good Friday. The Commemoration and Diptych are also not prayed because the church is preoccupied with the remembrance of the sufferings of our Lord Jesus and sorrowing over our sins which caused this pain to our compassionate Saviour.

### **Good Friday**

On Good Friday the priest raises the incense in front of the icon of the crucifix, while the deacons chant "Tay-Shory". This means: The Golden censer which carries the aromatic incense in Aaron's hand, who is the priest on the Alter. The Golden censer is Saint Mary, and the aromatic incense is our Good Saviour. She gave birth to Him and He saved us and forgave our sins.

At this point the priest says while he is raising the incense:

"We worship you O our Good Lord and your life giving Cross on which You were crucified to free us from our sins".

"My Lord Jesus Christ who was crucified on the cross quickly crush the devil under our feet".

"Hale to the cross upon which our King Christ was crucified to save us from our sins"

Roses and flowers are put around the icon of the crucifix to designate our loyalty and love to the crucified One. We do this with our departed loved ones, how much more fitting then is it, to do the same for Him who gave Himself up on the cross for our sake!

### **The chanting of Majesty**

On Palm Sunday, we chant “Ef Lo-Gemenos”, i.e. “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”. As on this day Jerusalem welcomed the Lord Jesus Christ as the awaited King...while on the 12<sup>th</sup> hour of Good Friday “Pek-ethronos” (Ps 45:6) is chanted. The chant of Pek-ethronos is to say “Your throne, O God, [is] forever and ever; A sceptre of righteousness [is] the sceptre of Your kingdom”, affirming that Christ is the living one who is Immortal, He is the King now and for evermore.

In Addition, we also chant before the psalm of the sixth hour on Good Friday the hymn “O-Mono-Genes ...” Which is “O the only begotten Son, the word of God, the Immortal and the everlasting. Despite His suffering and His crucifixion; He is the incarnated and Immortal word of God.

### **Reading of the four Gospels**

The four Gospels are fully read by the congregation during Passion Week, the chapters of the Gospels are distributed among those who pray the morning Pascha of each day as well as the morning of the feast, (i.e. Easter Sunday). The Gospel according to Saint Matthew is read on Tuesday, Saint Mark on Wednesday, Saint Luke on Thursday, and Saint John is read on Easter Sunday.

### **The Apocalypse and Joyous Saturday**

The night of Joyous Saturday is called “Apocalypse”, because the whole book of Revelation is read on that night. “Apocalypses” is a Greek word which became “Apoghalabseece” in the Hebrew Language meaning “Revelation” and referring to the book of revelation that starts with (Rev 1:1) “The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants--things which must shortly take place.”.

The church remains awake all night in chanting and singing side by side with her Bridegroom who died and was placed in the tomb for her sake, in songs which expresses the sadness of the sufferings that mankind has caused to our Saviour in conjunction with the happiness that was accomplished through the salvation on the cross.

May the blessing of the Pascha enrich us all spiritually and may the Lord grant you full health as well as spiritual and bodily prosperity.

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